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Rhythm and Reason

**'Serpent Heart,' By Barber,
Performed by Martha Graham**

By Harriett Johnson

The second annual festival of contemporary American music, sponsored by the Alice M. Ditson Fund and administered by Columbia University, got off to a distinguished start last night with the world premiere performance of Samuel Barber's ballet, "Serpent Heart." The work, commissioned by the Fund especially for this occasion had its choreography by Martha Graham, settings by Isamu Noguchi and costumes by Edythe Gilford.

An invited audience, overflowing with celebrities, overflowed also the auditorium of the Mc-Millin Academic Theatre to such an extent that several gentlemen of the press with their wives found themselves standing with the mob in the back of the room. Their reserved seats had evaporated in a mysterious and apparently irretrievable manner.



GRAHAM

Mr. Barber's ballet takes as the basis of its story the Greek myth of Medea, who in a frenzy of jealousy kills the new wife of the faithless Jason, her former husband, by winding around her a poisoned robe. In Miss Graham's version the dance is one of "possessive and destroying love, which feeds upon itself, like the serpent heart, and when it is overthrown, is fulfilled only in revenge."

The central character, "One like Medea," danced magnificently by Miss Graham, emerges in the dramatic climax, regal and diabolical, a red-purple scarf-like garment almost covering her. She drags with her the dead "Daughter of the King," danced by Yuriko. Medea covers Jason and the girl with the robe. The only other character is "The Chorus," portrayed by one person, May O'Donnell.

Noguchi's sets as usual are

severe in their stark simplicity, but powerful. A stylized tree, painted gold, undoubtedly to remind us of the fleece, stood on a huge green serpent. A curtain, glowing with a modulated red which became more brilliant as it went higher, provided the background. A few pieces resembling sculpture and forming raised platforms upon which the dancers could step, were the only additions. Miss Graham, in black with a circuitous like trimming winding itself around her dress was further symbolized by a red and green snake which she took from her bosom looked at and eventually returned from whence it came.

In the construction of both the choreography and the music, the tension mounts with a diabolical inevitability. The music, first, a plethora of germinal motives, turns for a moment into a dance tune, then goes into a lyrical section which builds irrevocably to a tremendous point of dramatic tension. Miss Graham's choreography is closely integrated with the music, but more than this, it creates in an inspired way of its own and speaks as intensely as the score. It was superbly danced by all four of the participants.

"Serpent Heart" should be seen many times before it can be truly absorbed as a work of art. On first seeing and hearing, however, I found both music and choreography compelling.

Aaron Copland's Pulitzer prize winner, "Appalachian Spring," opened the program, and endears itself to me more each time I come near it. Undoubtedly, an inspired piece of Americana. Louis Horst conducted the orchestra.